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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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~ MS Gets Own Antivirus! ~ People Are Talking! ~ SainT Is Updated!

~ Brit Snooping Illegal?! ~ The Net A Part of Life ~ JagFest @ AGE!
~ Most Children Get Spam ~ Electricity To The Web ~ Half-Life 2!
~ Challenge-Response Spam ~ Oracle Bid Rejected! ~ Whither Netscape?

-* Best of Creative Computing 2 *-
-* FTC Seeks More Power To Fight Spam! *-
-* Next AOL Version Offers Security, Spam Aid *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Well, Happy Friday the 13th to all of you are prone to believe! I don't care what the date is - it's Friday and I start a 1-week vacation! Naturally, it's likely to rain! But I also heard that much of next week is supposed to be nice. I certainly hope so.

I had what I hope is a prelude to my vacation - a nice day of golf yesterday. One of the companies that we do business with held their annual "customer appreciation" tournament. We won last year, and placed second this year (3-way tie, though). I'm hoping to get in a round or two next week if I can. I'm also planning a trip down to Maine to visit my father and brother. Naturally I want to visit my father for Father's Day. My brother picked me up a lawn tractor, so I have to get that and bring it back. No more 3-hour mowing for me!

We're still working on plans to renovate/enlarge our kitchen. I still have my vegetable garden to put in, and a few other odds and ends in the yard. We also have to open up the pool before the mosquitoes infest the water that's still sitting on top of the pool cover. I might get some rest sometime during the week! For now, this issue is out and I can start some relaxation and see what happens.

Until next time...

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SainT v1.32

SainT Update to v1.32

- Disk writing supported. (.ST and .MSA image file). You can use your fave ATARI tools and save your work !

- Keep sound playing option when loosing focus (windowed mode only)

- Some bugs fixed ("Posh" demo by Checkpoint is working)

http://leonard.oxg.free.fr/SainT/saint.html

Best of Creative Computing Volume 2

The Best of Creative Computing Volume 2 is now available on the Web in its entirety. Published in 1977, this book is a true classic, containing 300+ pages of articles and programs published in 1976, the second year of Creative Computing magazine.

http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/

A few highlights, in no particular order:

Building a MITS Altair 8800
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=272

Account of 1976 Star Trek Convention
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=162

Videodisc Systems
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=9

XEROX PARC Flight Simulator
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=37

A Retail Computer Store? You Gotta Be Kidding!!
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=91

Computer Literacy Quiz
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc2/showpage.php?page=62

Atariarchives.org also features the Best of Creative Computing volume 1
http://www.atariarchives.org/bcc1/
...as well as 13 other classic computing books.

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I shudder to think what this column is going to look like when it finally gets to Dana for inclusion in the magazine!

It’s time for a new computer ’round here, and things are still in total digital disarray. It’s tough getting everything back into shape, especially when you’re "jumping platforms". Yep, I’m back to the Intel-based world even though I think it’s an inferior architecture supported primarily by an over-rated operating system. Not that I’m going to mention any names, mind you. <Grin>

The major irritation factor right now is that I haven't had time to install Linux on the new computer and get everything set up the way I want it. It's not that it's hard to do or terribly time consuming but that, against my better judgement, I'm spending a little time checking out the latest Windows incarnation. While I find it more efficient and a bit more stable than its predecessors, it's also STILL a Microsoft product. And we all know how bad THAT is, don't we?

Well, let's get to the news, hints, tips and info available on the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
==========

Mike Stepansky posts this about Atari, Inc.:

"About Atari

New York-based Atari, Inc. (Nasdaq: ATAR) develops interactive games for all platforms and is one of the largest third-party publishers of interactive entertainment software in the U.S. The Company's 1,000+ titles include hard-core, genre-defining games such as Driver, Enter the Matrix, Neverwinter Nights, Stuntman, Test Drive, Unreal Tournament 2003, and Unreal Championship; and mass-market and children's games such as Backyard Sports, Nickelodeon's Blue's Clues and Dora the Explorer, Civilization, Dragon Ball Z and Roller coaster Tycoon. Atari, Inc. is a majority-owned subsidiary of France-based Infogrames Entertainment SA (Euronext 5257), the largest interactive games publisher in Europe. For more information, visit www.atari.com.

So, who owns Atari (the company who makes Atari XE/XL, ST, TT, Falcon)?

'Luposian' tells Mike:

"Infogrames bought up all the rights and such from Hasbro, who got them from JTS, who "bought up" the Tramiel-era Atari Corp., which died from some crappy, bass-ackwards decisions made by the Tramiels... but JTS also bit the dust shortly thereafter...

Then, recently (about two or three weeks ago, if memory serves me right), Infogrames dropped a *HUGE* bombshell and renamed themselves "Atari, Inc."! Every division across the world! See for yourself!

So, in essence, Atari is BACK!

However, they only make software these days (since they just changed all the names, not the business practices).

I'd like to know if they still own the copyrights, case molds, registration cards, and such from the ST/Mega ST/STe/TT/Falcon030 computer era. And, if so, whether they have any willingness to sell or license them for the right price.

So far as I know (or have read), I think Milan now owns the rights to TOS/GEM for the Atari ST. The PC version of GEM was recently GPL'd."

Mike now asks about the availability of games for the Falcon:

"Approximately, how many game titles are there for the Falcon/030? How about for Falcon/040?

Where can I find a list of games for it? (web link)

Is it possible to find Falcon emulator for the PC? (I have seen STe emulator for the PC)."

'Smeg' tells Mike:

"There is no such thing as a Falcon 040. At least one never got made commercially. There are however upgrade cards like the Afterburner which includes a 68040 cpu, and there are several clones around that used either the 68040 or the 68060. However it makes no difference to the amount of games available, except by saying maybe not all games for the Falcon will run on certain accelerators.

Cant remember [a list of games]. Try google. If you go to 1632systems.co.uk you can find a list of Falcon/STE/ST games that are still for sale. If you want to purchase, you can trust Nick he is one of the Good Guys.

[On the emulator thing...] Not exactly, however there is an emulator project (no flames please) called Aranym which uses/used the Falcon OS 4.04 although they are adamant it isn't a Falcon emulator. I haven't tried it for a long time so I cant say for sure how advanced it has got. Go to http://aranym.sourceforge.net/ and see for yourself."

Greg Goodwin adds:

"About a dozen Falcon specific ones were released commercially, and there were about the same number of PD ones. Still others took advantage of the Falcon hardware if it was found, but still ran on the ST or STe.

This isn't quite what you want, but you can find the games that RUN on the Falcon at http://www.myatari.com/f_games.txt . About two dozen are listed as "Falcon game". About 2/3 of the ST games can be coaxed into working on the Falcon -- I played Railroad Tycoon on it last night.

For many years Atarians hoped for a Falcon emulator. The closest so far is Aranym (I hoped I spelled that correctly). It isn't designed to be an emulator, but it's the only thing I know that runs TOS 4.04."

Joseph Place asks:

"A while back I changed from ICD to HD Driver. Now the MagiC logo screen is black and white instead of color. Is there a way to change this?"

'Mark D' asks Joseph:

"erm wait. Your falcon *ever* had a color boot screen for MagiC?

On my falcon it boots in ST-high. I will I could get it higher but for some reason it refuses. Anyone have a patch for this?"

Joseph tells Mark:

"When I used ICD, if I set ICD to boot in 256 colors, I would get the

boot splash screen in 256 colors. Now, even though I use boot config to set the system to boot in 256 colors, I get the 2 color mono splash screen, and then MagiC boots in 256 colors as normal."

Mike Freeman agrees with Joseph:

"Same here. My Falcon has never had a color splash screen at boot up. Perhaps ICD allows some graphics mode setting *after* the initial boot process has begun? I'll have to pull out my old ICD disks and experiment.

Personally, just for kicks, I'd love to have a 640x480 in 256 colors boot-up splash screen with Magic."

Mark replies:

"Maybe a patch could be made for ...ahem... paying customers of HD-Driver?"

Joseph tells Mark:

"If I remember correctly, the ICD HDUTIL program has an advanced tab where you can choose the computer you have and what video resolution you wish to boot. Perhaps this is something that could be added to HD-Driver? I'm sure it's design (HD-Driver) is for speed. My falcon boots much quicker with HD-Driver, especially if I set the Falcon NVRAM to two colors, and use a small, 2 color boot splash img file for MagiC."

Zothen Runecaster asks about an ST-compatible system:

"What is the best (that means most advanced) ST-compatible system today?

The last ST clone I know is the Milan , but as far as I know, newer Milan models
were cancelled ...

Or are there really good emulators that show how a "modern ST" would look like , that means that support resolutions a standard ST or even TT/Falcon never could ?

I like working with the ST , because Windows machines are really a pain - bugs , virus problems , Windows slows down the system , system crashes without reason etc. although Pentium/AMD CPUs are much more powerful than 68K , there are many "easy" tasks that can be done better with an ST.

Even the oldest version of Calamus is better than many expensive PC programs..."

Jospeh Place tells Zothen:

"It sounds to me like a Falcon030 with the CT60 will be the best system to have. I sure hope more of the CT60s will be made available (hint!)"

Edward Baiz tells Joseph:

"I kind of agree with you. I have and use a Hades060 as my main computer, but have a STe system right next to it. As far as being ST compatible, the Hades runs a lot of programs that the ST/STe computers run, but this does not include many games. If you want

to know my opinion, I would say the Falcon series of computers are the best ST compatible systems. The Falcon will run most ST programs and that includes a lot of ST games."

Hallvard Tangeraas asks about ASCII word wrap across platforms:

"I'm working on my Notator FAQ again (http://www.notator.org/html/notator_faq.html), trying to document what kind of problems a user can get into (as well as solutions for them of course!) when transferring files from a PC or Mac over to the Atari ST.

Regarding PCs there's this problem with ASCII text files... I'm not a PC user myself, but it seems that the consensus with text files is NOT to insert line-breaks in them, but have the reader of the file adjust this according to his/her text editor's window width ("soft-wrap").

Reading files like this on the Atari ST surely gives problems with lines containing hundreds of characters.

So what I'm looking for is a PC program which converts ASCII text files without line-breaks to get line-break characters inserted at every 80 character or less, or....
an ASCII text editor which inserts line-breaks automatically at every 80 character or less ("hard-wrap").

Although not strictly an Atari ST question, it is definitely related to our platform, and since nobody in the PC related groups will bother to help me (or don't know what I'm talking about?) I'm asking here.

The text editor needs to have this function set by default, or is very easy to set by the user. Is there such a program around, or do they all rely on "soft-wrapping" text?

As for the Mac, I'm using one of those and have for years used an ASCII text-editor which does the above as well as saves the file with CR/LF line-endings ("BBedit" for those curious)."

Our old buddy from Gribnif, Dan Wilga, tells Hallvard:

"On the PC, UltraEdit will do this conversion, as will many others. On the Atari side, STeno (and probably most other text editors) can be used."

Hallvard asks Dan:

"You mean, load an ASCII text-file *without* line-breaks, then save the file again which will now contain line-breaks at 80 characters or less (the screen width of the Atari ST)?

Are you talking about what I just mentioned now, or the ability to do "hard-wraps" (line-breaks) when writing new documents?
All Atari ST text-editors that I know of do line-breaks. I never came across any text files without them until I got on the Internet and received email messages and news postings from people using Outlook Express where "soft-wraps" is apparently a default setting, causing huge problems for many others.

Regarding STeno; isn't that a commercial text-editor not available any longer?

Another thing: is there a tool for the Atari ST which takes an ASCII

text document which *doesn't* contain line-breaks, then inserts line-breaks at 80 characters or less and resaves it?

"Blinex" is a nice tool which converts character sets between different platforms and changes the line-ending characters, but I haven't seen anything which fixes documents without line-breaks."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - More 'Castle Wolfenstein'!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Best of Show: Half-Life 2!
                                   Nintendo Is No Pushover!
                                   And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Zombies, Nazis Prowl 'Castle Wolfenstein'

When you consider the role of the Nazis in "Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War," an interesting question comes to mind: Why would a regime that regarded non-Aryans as less than human create a bunch of zombies?

It's another example of why you shouldn't think too hard when you're playing most computer games, and this $50 first-person shoot-'em-up from Activision and id Software doesn't give you a lot of time to wax philosophical. There are too many creatures to worry about.

The story goes back to 943 A.D., when a Saxon prince created an army of zombies. The prince, who had discovered the secret to immortality, was eventually defeated and entombed deep underground.

"Return to Castle Wolfenstein" flashes forward to 1943 when the Nazis, driven by Hitler's fascination with the occult, uncover records of the prince's tomb. Hitler wants to tap his powers to create his own army of zombies.

Players assume the role of Capt. William Joseph (B.J.) Blazkowicz, who is assigned to find out why the Nazis are poking around in northwestern Egypt. It's a quest that will take him from Egypt to Norway and eventually to the castle, where many of the features are based on real European castles.

The original "Castle Wolfenstein" game came out for the Apple II in 1983. Its followup, "Wolfenstein 3D," was completed in 1992. The first "Return to Castle Wolfenstein," made for Windows (now $30), was released at the end of 2001 and it eventually sold a million copies.

The Xbox incarnation, which has been out for about a month, is thoroughly addictive.

The controls are perfectly placed. The right and left thumbsticks move B.J. around and the right trigger button serves as the trigger for his weaponry. Pressing the right thumbstick helps him lean around corners to scout ahead. Pressing the left thumbstick toggles between the standing and crouching position, with a little icon showing the stance.

The A and B buttons let players scroll through a selection of weapons from pistols to a flame thrower. If you want to save ammo or keep noise level down, there’s a special button to kick a variety of containers to see if they hold any surprises.

A coded icon system quickly tells you if you can destroy or manipulate an object, or whether a door is locked. It saves time and avoids the distraction of having to try to smash everything in hopes of finding an ammunition clip, medical kit or key that you might need.

I prefer games that encourage stealth, and "Return to Castle Wolfenstein" rewards you for being patient, and picking your shots.

The weaponry is not only realistic but unforgiving. Guns can overheat and stop firing. They have to be reloaded. And, to quote one of my fellow players who learned the hard way, "You can’t hold the grenade too long" unless you want to become dogmeat.

"Return" has four levels of difficulty. "Can I Play, Daddy?" which is the easiest, has a slightly misleading name because it still has more splattered blood than you would want a child to see. On the higher settings, labeled "Don’t Hurt Me!" "Bring ’Em On!" and the ever-modest "I Am Death Incarnate!" an explosion can cause a gruesome scattering of body parts.

With a few exceptions, the music is first rate, raising the tension level when you’re about to dodge a lot of lead.

The game has several inexplicable elements. Although the Nazis sometimes speak in German, most of their comments and all of their letters are in English. Guns and bodies can float in mid-air. And B.J. is able to carry an outrageous amount of stuff, including gold, without getting weighed down.

To regenerate your health, there’s the usual assortment of medical kits to collect. You can also partake of food or wine that’s been left behind on the tables of soldiers who have abandoned their meals to find you. The wine, by the way, seems to do a better job of restoring your vitality than any med kit or solid meal. Unlike Wolfenstein 3D, you can’t chow down on dog food.

"Return to Castle Wolfenstein: Tides of War" is rated for mature audiences because of the violence, blood and gore. The just-released PlayStation 2 version, subtitled "Operation Resurrection," has no multiplayer or online options.

Video Game Critics Vote ’Half-Life 2’ Best of Show

As much as Hollywood critics tend to spurn movies involving exploding zombies, video game critics appear to love them.

A game centered on the adventures of a scientist who blasts an invading army of zombies has bested a field of rival offerings - including a driving adventure and a game first developed as a U.S. Army training tool - to win a coveted award from game commentators in results released on Tuesday.

"Half-Life 2," the sequel to one of the best-selling PC games of all time, won top honors in the "Game Critics Awards: Best of E3 2003," voted on by 35 judges from both mainstream and industry newspapers, magazines, and Web sites following the industry’s biggest trade show in mid-May.

The game, a graphically intense first-person shooter, has been hotly anticipated by gamers who still play 1998’s original and the various modifications, or "mods," that it spawned in the years since.

Developed by privately held Valve and set to be published by Vivendi Universal Games, a unit of Vivendi Universal, "Half-Life 2" is slated to come out later this year. Game companies often preview new offerings at the show and then prominently promote any awards they win on the front of their game boxes.

"Half-Life 2" beat out the military adventure "Full Spectrum Warrior," the racing game "Gran Turismo 4," the space-based military title "Halo 2," and tales of Arab royalty in "Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time" for top honors.

The game won a total of four honors, including Best PC Game, Best Action Game and a special commendation for its graphics.

The annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, is the game industry’s premier showcase, drawing more than 60,000 people to Los Angeles. Game publishers and developers usually show their biggest and best titles at the convention, with special emphasis on their holiday lineups.

The best console game of the show, according to the critics, was "Halo 2" from Bungie Studios for Microsoft Corp.’s Xbox. The original "Halo" is the best-selling game ever for the Xbox.

Of the 15 categories devoted specifically to games, 10 honored games that are either direct sequels or the latest game in a long-running series.

Honors for Best Original Game went to "Full Spectrum Warrior," a military action title under development by Pandemic Studios for publisher THQ Inc. It also won "Best Simulation Game" honors.

The commercial version of the game is a spin-off from a version developed for the U.S. Army as a way to train squad leaders in urban warfare.

Sony Corp.’s "EyeToy," a camera that attaches to a USB port on the company’s PlayStation 2 console and allows players to interact with games through body movements, won an award for Best Peripheral. The mini-games that will come with the EyeToy won honors in the trivia and parlor games category.

Conspicuously absent from the list were Electronic Arts Inc., the industry's largest publisher, and Nintendo Co. Ltd., which publishes games for its GameCube console and Game Boy handheld.

Both EA and Nintendo topped a number of "Best of 2002" lists with their titles "Battlefield 1942" and "Metroid Prime," respectively.

Nintendo No Pushover as Rivals Step Up Challenge

Slumping sales of its flagship video game console have left Japan's Nintendo vulnerable to challenges from portable game devices, but toppling the maker of the "Pokemon" and "Mario" franchises won't be easy, analysts say.

Sony Corp said in May that it would open a new front against Nintendo Corp next year by launching its own portable game device, the PSP, to go head-to-head with Nintendo's dominant Game Boy line.

The announcement sparked fears that Sony's victory in the console market would be repeated in Nintendo's bread-and-butter handheld market.

But analysts say don't count out Nintendo just yet.

"Nintendo has an edge over its rivals because its own franchises, notably Pokemon, strongly appeal to elementary schoolchildren, the core user group for handheld game machines," said Takashi Oya, senior analyst at Deutsche Securities.

That would likely keep Sony from quickly snapping up market share this time around, Oya said.

Nintendo virtually monopolizes the handheld market with more than a 90 percent share and protecting its dominance is crucial as the sector generated more than half of its sales and around 60-70 percent of operating profit in 2002/03.

A number of factors are playing in Nintendo's favor, analysts say.

Because Sony's PSP will not play existing PlayStation games and with Nintendo having sold over 150 million Game Boy units worldwide, independent game makers will be discouraged from developing PSP titles.

"The two systems are aimed at a different demographic market," said Hirokazu Hamamura, president of game magazine publisher Enterbrain.

"Like the toy-like GameCube and the movie-playable PlayStation (PS) 2, Game Boy will remain the leading handheld game machine while PSP will become more like a network-capable electronic gadget."

Sony has not set a price for the PSP, a multi-media unit that also plays movies and music, but analysts expect it to sell for 19,000-30,000 yen ($161-$255), well above the 12,500 yen price tag for Game Boy Advance SP, Nintendo's smaller version of its hot-selling device launched in February.

Sony's triumph in the console battle of the 1990s, when its PS toppled Nintendo64, was often attributed to the CD-ROM media adopted by Sony, which made it cheaper for software makers than Nintendo64's (N64) chip-based

mask-ROM.

Optical discs have advantages over mask ROM cartridges, including shorter turnaround time at replication, larger data capacity and lower material costs, which made it preferable to software developers.

Sony, which holds a five-to-one advantage over Nintendo and U.S. rival Microsoft Corp in the home console market, hopes the small optical disk that serves as the PSP's platform will top Game Boy's mask-Rom media.

But Nikko Citigroup analyst Soichiro Fukuda and others argue that Sony's incentive to go after market share is not as high this time because mobile games provide smaller margins, and less profit, than console games.

Traditional players are not the only challenge Nintendo faces, either. Mobile phone giant Nokia is creeping into the market with its N-Gage, a $299 hybrid phone and game device, while U.S. startup Tapware has its Helix Palm-based game system.

Here again, price may make the difference - to Nintendo's benefit.

"They won't be a direct competitor to Game Boy. N-Gage is way too expensive and Helix lacks financial power," Deutsche's Oya said.

News of Sony's assault on the handheld market sparked speculation that Nintendo might eventually follow Sega Corp, which stopped production of its loss-making Dreamcast console in 2001, out of the console market to focus on software.

But analysts play down such talk, pointing to the steady profit that Nintendo generates from its GameCube operations where solid software profits offset losses in hardware.

"As long as the GameCube operation is profitable and there is a chance to regain the No.1 spot, Nintendo should stay in the console market," said Deutsche's Oya.

If Nintendo is to grab a bigger share of the $30 billion dollar video game market, analysts say the veteran firm may also be better off seeking growth among its main user group, children.

"Nintendo doesn't have a cool enough image to appeal to an older audience," Nikko's Fukuda said.

"What it should do is hold fast to the under-15 age group and create killer franchises based on cartoons or characters which can also be featured in card games."

Concerns about its massive GameCube inventory and Sony's PSP threat have pushed Nintendo's stock down six percent over the past month to 9,030 yen on Thursday, despite an eight percent gain in the key Nikkei average.

Morgan Stanley's Shunji Yamashina is among many analysts who believe the stock is undervalued in terms of price-to-earnings.

"The stock is no longer a growth stock, but it's still a value stock. It's a good buying opportunity for long-term investors," he said.

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->A-ONE Gaming Online - Online Users Growl & Purr!
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JagFest @ AGE Announced!

We are pleased to announce our inclusion of JagFest 2003: JagFest on Tour into the first annual Austin Gaming Expo! JagFest, now going on its 7th year, is an annual event dedicated to the Atari Jaguar game system. This year, JagFest will be hosted at several different events across the country, giving many more people a chance to attend than in previous years. JagFest on Tour will include exhibitions of prototype hardware and software, tournaments, prizes, and more! Ambient Distortions has agreed to sponsor JagFest at AGE, and will be giving away several prizes to winners of the BattleSphere and Tempest 2000 tournaments, as well as exhibiting their recently released Jaguar game, Black Ice/White Noise.

Features of JagFest on Tour @ AGE include:

- Demos of unreleased games
- Sample upcoming releases, such as Mad Bodies
- Tournaments for Tempest 2000 and BattleSphere
- A chance to game with other Jaguar fans
- Prototype Jaguar Hardware
- Songbird Jaguar games for purchase and play

JagFest @ AGE will be open during the entirety of the AGE show, and will not require any additional admission costs for AGE attendees.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

FTC Seeks More Authority to Fight Spam

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission asked Congress on Wednesday for additional authority to fight the unwanted Internet "spam" that now accounts for up to half of all e-mail traffic.

In testimony before two congressional subcommittees, FTC commissioners urged lawmakers to extend telemarketing regulations to the Internet, loosen disclosure laws, and allow the agency to better cooperate with other countries to track down marketers who send out millions of deceptive online pitches daily.

"We are losing the battle, which is why it’s going to take a multifaceted approach," FTC Chairman Timothy Muris told the Senate competition subcommittee. "I have never seen a consumer-protection problem this difficult."

The FTC outlined its proposal in a letter to the Senate last week, but lawmakers in the House of Representatives seemed to be caught off guard.

House Commerce Committee Chairman Billy Tauzin said he was "surprised" by the FTC’s proposal but was willing to "refine and improve" an anti-spam bill he had developed.

Unsolicited, unwanted e-mail has skyrocketed in volume over the past several years, flooding users’ in-boxes and costing businesses billions of dollars in wasted bandwidth. Internet providers and filtering companies say spam now makes up between 40 percent and 80 percent of all e-mail.

FTC Commissioner Orson Swindle said spam "has become the weapon of choice for those engaged in fraud and deception" and could overwhelm the Internet’s most popular application.

The FTC has used anti-fraud laws and a database of millions of spams to prosecute some 53 spammers over the past few years, but FTC commissioners said they need additional powers to go after the worst offenders.

The new authority to go after spam should be modeled after the laws that give the FTC jurisdiction over telemarketers, the commissioners said, an approach taken by anti-spam bills in both chambers.

E-mail marketers should be required to describe their products honestly and honor requests to be taken off their contact lists, the commissioners said, while criminal penalties should be explored for those who falsify their return addresses.

Because many spammers close up shop and hide their assets once they realize they are being targeted, FTC agents should be allowed to examine their bank accounts without telling them for a limited period of time, commissioners said, or at least require their banks to delay notification.

FTC agents should be able to review spam complaints amassed by Internet providers and given greater latitude to go after spammers who hijack others’ accounts, they said.

The commissioners also are seeking changes in the law that would allow them to cooperate more closely with overseas authorities to investigate cases of cross-border fraud, many of which are carried out via e-mail.

"Cross border fraud legislation is a necessary element to make spam legislation effective," FTC Commissioner Mozelle Thompson said.

Some of these measures could weaken existing privacy safeguards and possibly allow foreign governments to pursue U.S. citizens who violate their laws, one privacy advocate said.

While new laws are needed to fight spam and other forms of fraud, "the bill should be drafted in such a way so as to safeguard important American values, including procedural fairness, privacy protection and open government," said Marc Rotenberg, executive director of the nonprofit Electronic Privacy Information Center.

Senator: Let’s Take Spammers to Court

U.S. Senator Charles Schumer has been promising for weeks to introduce an antispam bill, and on Thursday he unveiled a bill that would allow recipients of unsolicited commercial e-mail to sue spammers.

The liberal New York Democrat received support from a group he’s never worked with before, the Christian Coalition of America, while announcing the bill. Schumer and the Christian Coalition called themselves a "political odd couple."

"The avalanche of pornography being sent to kids by spammers makes checking e-mail on par with watching an X-rated movie," Schumer said in a statement. "Parents need to be able to keep offensive material out of the family room and I’m working with the Christian Coalition to do just that. The bottom line is that America’s children have been under attack for a long time - from violent TV shows, racy music videos, and now pornographic spam."

A Christian Coalition spokeswoman said Friday Schumer’s bill, called the Stop Pornography and Abusive Marketing (SPAM) Act, appeals to the group because of its focus on eliminating adult-themed spam. "It’s good legislation," said spokeswoman Michele Ammons. "We’re all about the family. We have received quite a few calls and e-mails from members complaining about pornographic spam."

Schumer and the Christian Coalition cited several statistics in touting the need for the legislation. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission has reported that adult-themed pictures appear in almost one out of every five e-mails that spammers use to advertise adult Web sites, and in a survey this month by Symantec, 47 percent of children reported receiving junk e-mail with links to pornographic Web sites. A 2001 U.S. Department of Commerce study found that 75 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds and 65 percent of 10- to 13-year-olds used the Internet.

Schumer’s bill would allow state attorneys general, Internet service providers and e-mail recipients to file civil suits against spammers. Antispam groups, including the Coalition Against Unsolicited Commercial Email (CAUCE), have called for the ability of e-mail recipients to sue spammers, and this is the first bill of seven introduced in Congress this year that would directly allow private lawsuits.

Others, including Montana Republic Senator Conrad Burns, cosponsor of the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003, argue that private lawsuits would be more of a boon for lawyers than a spam deterrent.

Schumer’s bill would also:

* Require e-mail marketers to label commercial e-mail with "ADV." Schumer argued this would allow ISPs and e-mail users to filter unwanted e-mail, but some antispam advocates suggest such a label will only harm legitimate marketers, because those sending illegal spam won’t comply.
* Require commercial e-mail to have accurate subject headings, and header and router information.
* Require commercial e-mail to have functional unsubscribe instructions. Some antispam advocates have criticized similar "opt-out" legislation, saying it legitimizes the first round of spam

sent to an e-mail user. Groups such as CAUCE have called on Congress to require all commercial e-mail to be sent only after a customer has opted in to receive it.

* Prohibit spammers from "harvesting" e-mail by using software to mine addresses on Web sites and other Internet areas. It also prohibits dictionary attacks, a practice that generates e-mail addresses by the random compilation of names and numbers.
* Create a national no-spam registry, maintained by the FTC. Parents will have the option of putting their children's e-mail address in the registry with a special designation prohibiting adult-themed e-mail. Spammers not abiding by the no-spam registry would be fined, and Schumer's bill would protect the list with "military-caliber encryption."

FTC commissioners have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of a national do-not-spam list, saying it'd be difficult to maintain because of the large number of e-mail addresses in the U.S. FTC Chairman Timothy Muris, while testifying before a Senate subcommittee Wednesday, also questioned if spammers would abide by the list.

"We're dealing with people who are already breaking the law," Muris said of fraudulent spammers. "I would personally, at the moment, be very reluctant to have my e-mail on a do-not-spam list because I'd be very afraid the spammers would get it."

But Schumer argued that his bill would give consumers and law enforcement multiple tools in fighting spam, with a do-not-spam list a way to justifiy fines for spammers. "My bill fights spam e-mail on two fronts - it gives parents the ability to regulate the e-mail sent to their kids and gives law enforcement the ability to go after those spammers that send this unwanted material out," he said in a statement.

Spam E-Mail Is Reaching Most Children

Four out of every five children receive inappropriate spam e-mail touting get-rich-quick schemes, loan programs and pornographic materials, according to a study released on Monday by Internet security provider Symantec Corp.

A majority of 1,000 children ages 7 to 18 interviewed for the survey said they felt "uncomfortable and offended when seeing improper e-mail content."

"Parents need to educate their children about the dangers of spam and how they can avoid being exposed to offensive content or becoming innocent victims of online fraud," said Steve Cullen, Symantec's senior vice president for consumer products.

One in five children opened and read spam, the study found, and more than half of the them checked e-mail without parental oversight.

Among the other findings in the survey:

-- 80 percent of the respondents said they are bombarded by sweepstakes messages.

-- 62 percent received spam touting dating services.

-- 47 percent received e-mails with links to pornographic Web sites.

-- 34 percent have felt uncomfortable receiving spam.

Symantec commissioned Applied Research, a market research firm, to conduct the study.

E-Mailers Turn Isolationist in Battle Against Spam

Halt! Who goes there? Friend or foe? Internet users frustrated by a rising deluge of spam, or junk e-mail, are resorting to a new arsenal of software tools that block or quarantine mail of unknown origin.

The anti-spam options range from address-book based systems that redirect mail from unknown senders, to image-blocking software, to collaborative reporting tools that allow users to report bulk e-mails with a single button click.

In general, Internet users are resorting to the tactics of the medieval castle guard who barred all strangers at the gate. That may sound appealing to anyone who has done battle with cat-and-mouse tactics of spammers or wrestled with a daily barrage of unwanted and often unsavory e-mail messages.

But some Internet watchers see the medium of e-mail - as a place for informal, even intimate, conversation - falling victim to the new anti-spam counteroffensive. The open communications system that once was electronic mail is breaking down as the mood of suspicion and helplessness grows, they say.

"The ’Net is balkanizing," said Karl Auerbach, an elected director of ICANN, the Internet policy board, and a veteran Internet engineer. "There are communities of trust forming in which traffic ... is accepted only from known friends."

EarthLink Inc. last week became the first of the major U.S. Internet service providers to introduce a so-called challenge-response system as an option for its 5 million members.

In simple terms, its new spamBlocker system checks all incoming mail against the recipient’s electronic address book. The user is then offered several ways to accept or reject unrecognized mail, speeding the effort of weeding out spam.

Rather than attempting to block e-mail based on the content of messages, challenge-response systems control access to an individual’s inbox by screening the senders of messages.

"It adds some effort to maintain the address book or challenge list," said Matt Cobb, director of product development at EarthLink Inc., but it pays off in the long run because the system learns to recognize friends.

He says this is the best way for the user to control unsolicited e-mail. "The only way to get 100 percent spam-protection is permission-based filtering," Cobb said, referring to the two-stage process of accepting approved e-mail and rejecting spam.

Qurb (pronounced "curb") Inc. is another e-mail filtering systems to

attract positive reviews recently. Co-founder Felix Lin sees spam-fighting as just a subset of the need for a more comprehensive approach to managing one’s own personal information and communications. Qurb may appeal to heavy e-mail users who already organize their contacts electronically.

Lin, previously co-founder and chief executive of AvantGo, the popular Web subscription system for handheld computer users, believes Qurb can act as a natural extension of electronic address books kept by millions of Palm and Outlook users. The software is available at http://www.qurb.com/ for a free 60-day trial and costs $24.95 to keep.

Cloudmark’s SpamNet takes a collaborative approach, placing faith in the judgment of some 480,000 SpamNet users to decide if a message is spam or not.

SpamNet works by warning the user when he or she is defying the judgment of other users. Users have the option to accept this e-mail and override the implicit groupthink of the system. The service costs $4.99 a month and is geared toward users of Microsoft’s Outlook information management system.

But challenge-response systems have provoked raging debate in technical circles. Critics worry that by heavily favoring known addresses, the danger grows of "false positives." In other words, unrecognized e-mail from friends, acquaintances or business prospects may be blocked or fall between the cracks.

Consumer Internet service providers (ISPs) such as AOL, Microsoft, Yahoo and EarthLink have engaged in a race this year to match each other feature-for-feature. All offer a simple spin on the collective spam-fighting efforts of Cloudmark.

Yahoo asks its users to report "e-mail abuse" to Yahoo via a prominently displayed "This is spam" button within the user’s e-mail inbox. MSN’s own button is bluntly labeled "junk."

AOL spokesman Nicholas Graham said its centralized spam-filtering relies almost entirely on reports from millions of members. "This is not the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain that decides how to block spam. It is members making an average of 9 million individual pleas each day for help," Graham said.

Dr. Paul Judge, chairman of an Internet industry task force on spam, told a recent technical conference on spam that the Internet’s expectation of openness needs to be rethought.

From a technical perspective, e-mail has been treated as "innocent until proven guilty." The default toward openness worked previously because mails were more likely to be desirable messages than spam. Now it’s more likely spam.

"Is it time to consider closed systems?" asks Judge, chief technology officer of e-mail security company CipherTrust Inc.

Next Version of AOL to Offer Security, Spam Tools

America Online said on Monday the next version of its Internet service, to be released this summer rather than in a typical fall launch, would include

more security and safety tools for high-speed users.

AOL 9.0 follows the launch earlier this year of AOL 8.0 Plus, the Internet arm of AOL Time Warner Inc.’s first high-speed Internet offering of programming and tools geared primarily to those who already had faster Web connections.

The new version will be the first one from AOL that is focused on high-speed users. In the past, most upgrades have been focused on dial-up users who account for the bulk of its business.

AOL is now trying to offset a slump in advertising and contraction in its dial-up subscriber base with paid features and its new bring-your-own-access service for high-speed Internet users.

The Dulles, Virginia-based company is also beginning to move away from one major new version a year and unveiling upgrades when it has major innovations, America Online Vice President Jeff Kimball told Reuters.

AOL said in a statement that AOL 9.0 will help protect high-speed users with anti-virus scanning, improved parental controls and customized firewall tools. The new version will also include an adaptive filter that learns to recognize what type of e-mail a user views as spam.

Safety and security issues are top priorities for Internet users, Kimball said.

AOL 9.0 will also include more e-mail improvements and allow users to personalize the service more, as well as offer a media player that supports a new streaming media format developed by America Online.

Electric Companies Plug Homes Into the Internet

Electricity companies want to give fresh meaning to the words plug-and-play by sending high speed Internet to the wall sockets in your home.

The first world conference of electric companies, equipment makers and others gathered for a day this week in efforts to make the Internet even more ubiquitous by channeling it through power lines into homes.

"Within minutes of opening the box, the customer can be on the Internet," Keith McLean, who heads the Internet project for Scottish and Southern Energy in Perth, Scotland, said late on Tuesday.

The modem plugs into the wall, then the computer. No extra software is needed. The three dozen players who attended the Power Line Communications meeting from Europe, Japan and the United States hope for big growth, although obstacles remain.

So far, Scottish and Southern has run a pilot project of 200 people using the system. It is about to launch a new test system to serve 15,000 people in limited areas at 29.99 pounds ($50) a month.

At first blush, the advantages of the electric Internet system seem considerable.

For one thing, it neatly avoids the "last mile" problem which has stymied

high speed Internet competition across Europe.

Competitors have made little progress against established phone companies who they say make life tough by charging too much to use the copper telephone wires which go into homes.

The European Commission has joined the fray, going so far as to fine Deutsche Telekom, but it says the market is still largely closed.

Electricity companies have their own last mile of copper into every home, including parts of eastern Europe where home phones are far from universal.

And the companies reach rural areas too expensive to be connected to high speed ADSL running on telephone lines and too remote for cable TV operators to reach. Power companies have monthly billing and are established.

"We can compete with ADSL," said Marcos Lopez Ruiz of Madrid, president of the Public Utilities Alliance. Ruiz says the companies can make money with one home in 10 or fewer subscribing, about the same as ADSL and better than cable.

And the speed is faster than most ADSL, with power company Internet sending the Web in and out of homes at one million bits per second or higher.

But equipment is expensive and power companies never known for marketing prowess must compete against phone companies, Internet firms and cable companies.

The new systems face a bureaucratic tangle too. Power regulators, telephone regulators and radio regulators, who worry signals may leak, all want to be in a position to say "no."

As an internal working document of the European Commission’s communications directorate presented to the conference said: "Regulatory uncertainty remains."

The technology has been greeted with enthusiasm at the Commission, looking to promote competition in high-speed Internet as a key technology to make Europe more competitive. But it is unclear how fast the Commission can cut red tape.

Meanwhile, technological development and demonstration projects are moving apace.

Industrial experts say Europe leads the new technology with tests at Endesa in Spain, Enel in Italy, EnBW in Germany and EDP in Portugal.

Basic equipment is made by Ascom of Switzerland and Main.Net of Israel. Signal is sent at 10 megabits per second across high, medium and low-voltage lines in a band from 1.6 to 30 MhZ.

Victor Dominguez Richards, strategy director for DS2 of Valencia, Spain, which researches and designs system equipment said: "We have a development path to handle much more."

Microsoft to Offer Own Antivirus Product

Microsoft Corp. said Tuesday it will acquire antivirus technology from a Romanian software company and develop its own antivirus product, stepping into a market it has long ceded to others specializing in software security.

Microsoft signed an agreement to buy the intellectual property and technology assets of antivirus software and consulting firm GeCAD Software Srl. of Bucharest for an undisclosed amount. Some of the company's software developers will join Microsoft, but details haven't been finalized, said Mike Nash, corporate vice president of Microsoft's security business unit.

Microsoft plans to release its own antivirus product at some unspecified date, but has not decided whether basic antivirus technology will be bundled into its Windows operating system, Nash said.

The company will sell corporate customers and consumers subscriptions for the updated innoculation files that protect against new viruses.

Nash said Microsoft needs to do more to protect its customers from viruses and other malicious programs, in addition to working with security companies, such as Symantec Corp. and Network Associates Inc., which make the most popular antivirus programs for consumers.

The president of Network Associates, Gene Hodges, said Microsoft told his company it would not bundle antivirus capability into the Windows operating system.

Network Associates announced an alliance last month with Microsoft to share sensitive details about the latest computer threats facing Windows users.

"We intend to keep up with the alliance unless Microsoft changes it plans from what they've told us," Hodges said.

One analyst, Michael Rasmussen at Forrester Research Inc., compared Microsoft's decision to "mafia-type" behavior of offering additional protection for customers who pay extra for it.

"The world does not want Microsoft to be a security vendor, it wants Microsoft to provide secure products," Rasmussen said.

Microsoft, which has struggled to improve its software security under its "Trustworthy Computing" campaign, has been sensitive to criticism about the susceptibility of its products to computer viruses. The company has responded by tightening the security of its popular Outlook e-mail software, but its reputation has largely hinged on consumers successfully using products outside Microsoft's control.

Antivirus vendors have been painfully aware what could happen if Microsoft moved into the business. Network Associates and Symantec, for example, have starkly warned investors their business could suffer dramatically if Microsoft decides to build antivirus features into Windows.

Network Associates cautioned in a November 2002 filing with U.S. regulators that such a move by Microsoft "could render our products obsolete and unmarketable."

Symantec warned in a February 2003 securities filing that a decision by Microsoft to include features in Windows that compete with its core products "may decrease or delay the demand for certain of our products, including those currently under development."

In a statement, Symantec said it was still deciding the ramifications of Microsoft’s announcement.

"While we still need to understand the full implications for this announcement, we applaud Microsoft’s efforts to develop an operating system upon which antivirus vendors can build more effective protection," the company said.

Sophos Inc., another popular antivirus company, suggested that Microsoft might not realize how much effort and expense was involved in fighting viruses.

"Providing a viable antivirus solution to the market requires far more resources and commitment than most people realize," said Chris Belthoff, senior security analyst at Sophos.

PeopleSoft Board Rejects Oracle Takeover

PeopleSoft Inc.’s board of directors Thursday announced that it is recommending that stockholders reject Oracle Corp.’s hostile takeover bid.

At the same time, financial analysts are frowning on Oracle’s attempt to gobble up PeopleSoft, with Moody’s Investors Services changing its ratings outlook for the database giant to negative.

Oracle, of Redwood Shores, Calif., late last week offered PeopleSoft stockholders $16 per share, or about $5 billion, to buy its enterprise software rival. The move came days after PeopleSoft itself had announced a $1.7 billion deal to acquire a third enterprise software vendor, J.D. Edwards & Co.

PeopleSoft officials, in Pleasanton, Calif., said the board believes that Oracle’s offer would be tied up for a long time by U.S. and European government antitrust investigations, and that regulators were likely to block the deal on grounds that it would unfairly limit competition.

"The unsolicited and hostile nature of the offer, combined with Oracle’s statements, is designed to disrupt [PeopleSoft’s] strong momentum at significant cost to PeopleSoft’s customers. As a result, after careful consideration the Board, including a committee of independent directors, unanimously recommends that PeopleSoft stockholders reject the offer and not tender their shares to Oracle," a statement from PeopleSoft said.

The board also said the $16 per share offer undervalued the company.

"Oracle’s offer seeks to enrich Oracle at the expense of PeopleSoft’s stockholders, customers and employees," said PeopleSoft President and CEO Craig Conway, in a statement.

In addition to rejecting Oracle’s overtures, the board recommitted the company to buying Denver-based J.D. Edwards. Bob Dutkowsky, the J.D. Edwards CEO, earlier this week made the same arguments against the Oracle deal.

Meanwhile, New York-based Moody’s downgraded its outlook on Oracle, but kept its rating on the company at A3.

Moody’s cited the size of the hostile takeover as the cause of the outlook change. Moody’s rating change noted that use of cash and additional bridge financing needed to fund the cash tender offer for all outstanding common shares of PeopleSoft was "substantial."

The ratings change notice also said that Moody’s expects a few things: a reduction in Oracle’s financial flexibility after completing the acquisition; that Oracle will have to substantially increase its tender offer price of $16 per share; and that whatever expense reduction Oracle has in mind will not offset expected revenue loss at PeopleSoft as Oracle winnows out the company’s products.

Oracle recently moved up its fiscal fourth quarter earnings report from its original date of next Tuesday, June 17, to today. A company spokeswoman said the move had nothing to do with company’s PeopleSoft bid and was being made simply because necessary work was finished earlier than anticipated.

As of Feb. 28, 2003, Oracle had $6 billion in cash and short-term investments. As of March 31, PeopleSoft had $1.9 billion in cash, with no debt outstanding.

L.A. Man Gets 3-Year Sentence in eBay Fraud Case

A Los Angeles man who perpetrated one of the largest Internet auction frauds on eBay was ordered on Friday to spend three years working by day and spending his nights in prison to pay back those he defrauded.

Chris Chong Kim, 28, will spend his nights at a California prison and his days working to repay some of the $600,000 he took from customers who ordered computers from him but never received them, a district attorney’s spokeswoman said.

"Part of the pay he earns will pay for his upkeep and he has to also pay all the victims back in three years," district attorney’s spokeswoman Jane Robison said. Robison said it was not clear what type of work Kim will do.

An eBay Inc. spokesman applauded efforts by law enforcement officials to bring Kim to justice. "Our cooperative efforts have put a criminal behind bars and will repay eBay users," eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove said.

More than 170 people worldwide registered complaints against Kim and his company, Calvin Auctions, with the Internet Fraud Complaint Center, prosecutors said.

At his sentencing, Kim turned over 81 checks totaling $100,000 that will go toward repaying the $180,000 he owes to 80 of his victims. He also owes money to Bank of America and PayPal, the Internet payment service provider, Deputy District Attorney Jonathan Fairtlough said.

PayPal, which is owned by Ebay, paid $370,000 to reimburse Kim’s customers for the laptops, computers and other equipment they purchased but did not receive. Bank of America, which maintained Kim’s bank accounts, lost nearly $30,000 in bounced checks, Robison said.

Fairtlough said Kim ran a legitimate, high-end computer sales company for about two years, but stopped shipping merchandise in April 2002.

CalvinAuctions.com was shut down last July, at the end of a probe by the Southern California High Tech Task Force. Kim was arrested last December.

Whither Netscape?

The longstanding battle between Netscape and Microsoft has finally come to an end. On May 29, AOL Time Warner, which now owns Netscape, agreed to settle a 2002 antitrust suit. AOL had charged Microsoft with illegally using its power in the operating system market to overtake Netscape in the market for Web browsing software. Microsoft will pay AOL $750 million, and over the next seven years, AOL will license the Microsoft Internet Explorer Web browser for use with the AOL online service, which now has 35 million members.

So what does this mean for Netscape Communications, purchased by AOL for $4.2 billion in 1999? According to Netscape spokesperson Derrick Mains, it’s still business as usual at the company. Netscape will release a new version of its browser in the next 45 days, and the company still puts a great deal of work into its Web portal, Netscape.com.

"We’re very much committed to the browser," says Main. "And AOL Time Warner has made it a priority to use Netscape.com as one of the premier means of distributing content online. If you go there, you’ll find all the premier Time Warner properties, including People and CNN and Time Magazine." The portal has 200 million unique visitors each month.

The Netscape browser isn’t nearly as popular, though. According to the latest study from WebSideStory, a San Diego, California Internet research firm, Netscape accounts for only 3.4 percent of the browser market as of August 2003, down from 13 percent in 2001. The browser has fallen a long way since it’s heyday in the early years of the Web, when it controlled 90 percent of the market.

But AOL’s decision to license Internet Explorer - which now boasts a 96 percent market share - for the next seven years shouldn’t necessarily be seen as a death blow to the Netscape browser. There have long been rumors that AOL would drop IE for its Windows-based online service in favor of the Netscape browser, but this never came to fruition. The service has always been bundled with IE. And Gecko, the rendering engine at the heart of Netscape, will continue to run browsers on the Macintosh version of the AOL service and on the CompuServe online service, which AOL purchased in 1998. Netscape is down, but not necessarily out.

Employers in Britain Risk Prosecution for Snooping on Staff

Employers in Britain who snoop on their workers’ e-mails and telephone calls could find themselves in court, the government’s information commissioner Richard Thomas warned.

Intrusive monitoring will have to be justified, and in almost all cases employees will have to be told when they are being watched, according to advice published by the commissioner Wednesday.

The Employment Practices Data Protection Code covers a range of

surveillance activities including opening e-mails or voicemail, checking Internet usage, and recording with closed-circuit TV cameras.

It sets out how employers should comply with the Data Protection Act and encourages respect for the Human Rights Act, which creates a right to respect for personal correspondence.

"Employers may have alternative ways of meeting these requirements," the commissioner’s advice said. "But if they do nothing, they risk breaking the law."

The Net: Now, Folks Can’t Live Without It

When Bethany Tate moved to Seattle over two years ago from Philadelphia, she decided to look for new friends online in chat rooms that focused on heavy metal music and photography. But most friendships she developed there remained virtual, which for her was a downer. "You never get the sense of what people are really like [through chat]," she says. Then last January, she discovered a company called There, which is testing a more expressive variety of Internet communication that until now has showed up mainly in electronic games.

At There, which is basically a virtual place for hanging out, a human assumes an online identity - an avatar. For instance, Tate runs a clothing design business at There, whereas in reality she’s starting a film production company. Visitors can chat while adopting the persona of a cartoon-like character that talks by spouting bubbles or by using voice-over-Internet-protocol [VoIP] to speak to another person.

An avatar can raise an eyebrow, plant a kiss on another avatar, or throw daggers at the other character. The idea is to simply spend time together: playing paintball wars, driving around in hovercraft, visiting waterfalls, or talking. Tate, 26, a beta tester on the site, which is expected to go live later this year, says she’s finally getting to know other people. She has already made one offline friend at There, whom she now meets twice a month for lunch.

Call it the Social Web. Through the dot-com bubble and bust, one trend has never wavered. Every year, millions more people around the world are using the Internet to interact in more ways than ever before - to date, find old classmates, check on medical ailments and cures, to read and express alternative views of the news, and even to get live sales help online. It’s happening at work as well: Want to check your 401[k], pay stub, or file an expense account? Increasingly, that’s all on the Web.

And these new trends complement some long-standing ones: Some 53 million Americans - one in six - now visit a chat room every month, according to market researcher Nielsen/Net Ratings, up from one in 10 in 2001, according to tech consultancy Forrester Research. E-mail is now the most popular online activity for 93% of some 4,431 Web regulars surveyed by Net consultancy Jupiter Research last September. Moreover, entrepreneurs are once again investing in ideas aimed at improving online communication.

Over the past two years, "there has been a significant shift from e-commerce to rediscovering e-communications," says David Silver, director of the Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies at the University of Washington in Seattle. For subscribers seeking love on dating sites such

as Yahoo! Personals, video and voice greetings can now be posted. And in the future, "the distinction between talking on the phone and watching movies and playing games will become blurred," predicts Nolan Bushnell, the gaming guru who in 1972 founded Atari, which made the first commercial video-arcade game, Pong. Bushnell, who's considered the father of computer entertainment, believes that eventually all types of media will combine to create a completely new communication experience via the Web. That will change everything from online shopping to dating to teleconferencing.

The shift Silver cites already reflects to a significant degree major advances in Web technology. Just 12 months ago, Wi-Fi, which allows for fast, wireless Internet access, didn't even exist in the public consciousness. Today, an estimated 4 million people worldwide use the technology to connect to the Web - and each other - from just about anywhere, a number that's expected to grow to 63.3 million by 2007, according to market consultancy Gartner.

In late June or early July, handheld maker Palm will release software that lets users of its new Tungsten C personal digital assistant make phone calls via Wi-Fi networks to other Wi-Fi-enabled devices - such as the latest generation of phones from the likes of networking giant Cisco. A month or so after that, Palm will release special software that allows those same people to make calls to any mobile or regular phone. They'll simply open their buddy list, click on the icon of the person they wish to call via a Wi-Fi connection, and the PDA's software will take care of the rest, explains Paul Osborne, a senior product manager at Palm.

That's a smart move, because voice-over-Wi-Fi and VoIP are taking off because both are cheaper than long-distance calling. The market for VoIP services, such as videoconferencing, should grow from $46 million in 2001 to as much as $36.5 billion by 2008, predicts think tank Allied Business Intelligence in Oyster Bay, N.Y.

At the same time, the Internet is spawning a broader convergence of voice and data. Internet service provider Earthlink is developing a follow-me Net service, which it expects to introduce within the next two years. One feature: When customers shut down their desktops, the software would immediately redirect all e-mail to their PDAs or cell phones. When they open the door to their home, the software would redirect the same material to their home network, says Mike Lunsford, Earthlink's executive vice-president for customer experience.

Many other outfits are also focusing on improving today's communications tools. On June 10, startup Trepia in Fremont, Calif., released its latest version of something called location-based instant messaging. The software uses a PC's IP address to identify the person's location - as long as they're connected via Wi-FI. Then, it uploads a list of people on the Trepia network onto the computer's buddy list, starting with those located nearby. College students would first see those among the 15,000 Trepia users who live in their dorm, then those living on campus, then those located in the same city, and so on.

The software could be used for striking up a conversation or helping a business traveler find other people attending the same conference, says Jawed Karim, Trepia's CEO. The startup plans to offer the service for free and charge for advanced functions such as searching through the buddy list, Karim says. Whether this marginal improvement will gain enough traction for Trepia to prosper is a long shot, however.

Marketers see the potential of e-communications to not only flog their

brand but also to do online focus groups. The site called There recently signed agreements with jeansmaker Levi Strauss & Co. and athletic-gear giant Nike to market their designs on There's site. Result: A test version of the site now sells a Levi's jeans jacket for avatars for $5. The item has been a hit, according to There - a good sign for Levi, which is planning to release the jacket in the real world this year.

In the future, There could receive a chunk of revenue by providing its corporate partner with aggregate - as opposed to personal - data on the demographics of the people who cotton to its brand, says There CEO Tom Melcher. The outfit, which is supported by investors such as Kevin Ryan, CEO of Internet marketer DoubleClick , should launch officially in the third quarter.

Over the past four years, illegal swapping of music files has arguably been the greatest form of e-communication. Even as the music industry is building a corral around such activity, however, Microsoft has begun testing a new product that should enable teens to better share music and Web videos - presumably in a legal manner. Called 3 degrees and available in its test format at threedegrees.com, the service would allow up to 10 friends to chat as a group, compile a common playlist of up to 60 songs, and share photos, says Lisa Gurry, a product manager at Microsoft's MSN portal. Each member would also be able to adopt an identity [in test trials, a green monster - resembling a dragon with wings - has been the hands-down favorite]. The concept of this group instant message could also be used in the corporate market, analysts say, and increase the "stickiness" of the MSN brand.

That's not to overlook the fact that the mere existence of the Web is enriching as it provides a huge diversity of views. Take Web logs, or blogs, which can assume the form of an online diary or a message board [see "The Wild World of 'Open-Source Media'"]. What about medical information? Until a few years ago, all most people knew about their ailments or treatments was what they learned from their physician. Now, it's possible at the click of a mouse to get all of that and much, much more - in some states, even information on doctors' malpractice histories.

In the spring of 2002, 60% of respondents to a Pew Internet & American Life poll of 550 Americans said information they found on the Web helped them influence their care. Pew also found that one-third of those surveyed read political information online - and that half of those said what they learned online affected their votes. "We're still in the toddler stage," says Lee Rainie, the project's director. "People are still relatively passive in using the Web." That will almost certainly change, though, as interaction online lets more opinions filter through.

Other advances in communications are also changing e-commerce. New York-based LivePerson sells software that AT&T, BellSouth, and Microsoft are using to help sell products and services, such as DSL [digital subscriber line] broadband Net access. The software analyzes the behavior of a visitor to a shopping site, for instance, to determine when the person might need a salesperson's help. If so, a LivePerson communications box might pop up on a Web page if the customer ha ksept an item in an online shopping cart for more than five minutes wihotut making the purchase, says Robert LoCascio, LivePerson's CEO and chaimarn. The popup might ask if the customer would like to talk via instantmes sage [VoIP is coming next] with a live salesperson. "We want to mirrorth e real-life selling experience," LoCascio says.

He claims that the software can help a businessth at serves 5,000 or more

online visitors a day increase sales byat least $2 million annually. The product lists for $10,000 per month orf a version that allows five customer-service reps to answer queries. Because the reps can multitask - instant messaging several customers simultaneously, while talking on the phone to yet another - it costs about $1.20 to answer a customer's question online vs. $6 on the phone, calculates LoCascio. Eventually, LivePerson's pop-up boxes could appear next to search results in search engines, he says. That could lend at least a small push to e-tailing, whose revenues should rise 27% over last year to $95 billion in 2003, according to tech consultancy Forrester Research.

Some believe that customer-salesperson communication could improve the Net's commercial potential. About three months ago, LivePerson decided to morph from a customer-relationship-management [CRM] company, which it had been since its public offering in 2000, to an e-communications outfit for corporate clients, says LoCascio. Much of that could be a reflection of the difficulty smaller concerns have now in selling CRM. As consumers and business increasingly socialize via the Web, "we'll be the next AT&Ts," LoCascio says of his $8.9 million company - with perhaps a dose of hyperbole. "There's no value any more in the dial tone."

Such a development is still sometime away, since the great majority of consumers usually lag well behind the pace of innovation in communications. Still, the Social Web's evolution will be relentless. During the Internet's early days, many sociologists worried that people would lock themselves out of the real world and recede into a virtual one.

That hasn't happened yet. On the contrary, studies show that e-mail and instant messaging have had no effect on the amount of time people spend communicating via traditional means, says John Robinson, a sociologist at the University of Maryland. People sleep less now - though that hasn't been scientifically linked to increased communication.

The Social Web's ultimate impact is that "a whole generation is growing up without knowing what it's like to live without [the Internet]," says Geoff Raslton, senior vice-president for network services at portal Yahoo!. From 2002 to 2007, the number of U.S. households with access to the Web will rise 33%, to 89 million, Jupiter predicts. And with the new e-communication technologies making talking more fun and interactive, yakking it up should hit an all-time high.

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